

China's Strait of Malacca Dilemma: Beijing's Dual Strategy to Secure Energy and Challenge US Naval Influence

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<https://doi.org/10.70758/elqarar/9.25.1>

Received : 30/12/2025

Accepted : 11/1/2026

Published : 15/1/2026

Cite this article as: Salloum, Youssef, *China's Strait of Malacca Dilemma: Beijing's Dual Strategy to Secure Energy and Challenge US Naval Influence*, *ElQarar Journal for Peer-Reviewed Scientific Research*, vol 9, issue 25, Third year, 2026, pp. 19-32. <https://doi.org/10.70758/elqarar/9.25.1>

Abstract

The geopolitical “Malacca dilemma” is at the core of this study, which examines China’s “dual-axis strategy” to address this challenge and its regional implications. The problem of the study centers on China’s strategy of diversifying logistical routes and enhancing maritime capacity, affecting international alliances’ counter-reactions in the Indian Ocean due to intensified competition for influence. Further, the study, based on descriptive and analytical approaches, showed that China’s strategy represents a profound geopolitical shift towards building a “flexible naval shield” in order to weaken American influence in the Indian Ocean, but this expansion has fueled a regional arms race. Accordingly, the study concludes that the solution lies in the need for China to balance deterrence requirements with activating regional cooperation mechanisms to ensure the stability of vital waterways.

Keywords: Malacca dilemma, dual axis strategy, Indian Ocean, Chinese navy, geopolitical deterrence, American influence.

معضلة الصين في مضيق ملقا: استراتيجية بكين المزدوجة لتأمين الطاقة وتحدي النفوذ البحري الأمريكي

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تاريخ النشر: 2026/1/15	تاريخ القبول: 2026/1/11	تاريخ الاستلام: 2025/12/30
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للاقتباس: سلوم، يوسف، معضلة الصين في مضيق ملقا: استراتيجية بكين المزدوجة لتأمين الطاقة وتحدي النفوذ البحري الأمريكي، مجلة القرار للبحوث العلمية المحكمة، المجلد التاسع، العدد 25، السنة الثالثة، 2026، ص-ص 19-32.

<https://doi.org/10.70758/elqarar/9.25.1>

المُلخَص

تُعدّ «معضلة ملقا» الجيوسياسية جوهر هذه الدراسة التي تتناول «استراتيجية المحور المزدوج» الصينية لمواجهة هذا التحدي وتداعياته الإقليمية. تتمركز إشكالية الدراسة حول مدى تأثير تبني الصين لهذه الاستراتيجية المتمثلة في تنويع المسارات اللوجستية عبر الممرات البرية وتعزيز القدرة البحرية على إدارة المعضلة مع تصاعد ردود الفعل المضادة من التحالفات الدولية في المحيط الهندي نتيجة إحتدام التنافس الدولي على النفوذ. أظهرت الدراسة، بالاعتماد على المنهجين الوصفي والتحليلي، أن استراتيجية الصين تمثل تحولاً جيوسائياً عميقاً نحو بناء «درع بحري مرن» من أجل إضعاف النفوذ الأمريكي في المحيط الهندي، إلا أن هذا التوسع أدّى إلى تأجيج سباق تسلح إقليمي. وعليه، تخلص الدراسة إلى أن الحل يكمن في ضرورة موازنة الصين بين متطلبات الردع وبين تفعيل آليات التعاون الإقليمي لضمان إستقرار الممرات المائية الحيوية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: معضلة ملقا، استراتيجية المحور المزدوج، المحيط الهندي، البحرية الصينية، الردع الجيوسياسي، النفوذ الأمريكي.

INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea is a critical global body of water and a potential flashpoint for major international conflicts. Tensions are exacerbated by Chinese maritime claims, particularly the Nine Points - Line, which asserts sovereignty over nearly 90% of the entire sea. This brings Beijing into direct conflict with its regional neighbors and the United States, which is bound by the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Furthermore, China built fortified islands, naval bases and aviation centers to bolster its influence and prove its right to sovereignty.⁽¹⁾

The Strait of Malacca, a strategic shipping lane, is considered a maritime intersection point, as it represents the primary maritime link between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and facilitates global trade. China is heavily concentrated in this strait, relying on it for two-thirds of its maritime trade and 80% of its oil imports, which in turn constitute 60% of its total oil supplies.⁽²⁾ The aforementioned trade fulcrum constitutes a strategic Achilles' heel for China. Should an international competitor halt transit through the strait, the impact on both the nation's economy and military readiness would be catastrophic.

China has developed a "Dual Axis" strategy to avoid dependence upon the Malacca Strait and also strategic access to energy supplies; such as with heavy investment through the Belt and Road Initiative especially transcontinental pipelines and infrastructure. Key projects also include the China-Central Asia gas pipeline, Russia's proposed Siberia 2 energy pipeline, and vital corridors through nearby countries. In this context, China's military budget has increased to \$240 billion annually over the past two decades, to finance the growth of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLAN) Navy to secure its interests and challenge the influence of the US Navy in the Indo-Pacific region. The focus of this plan is evident in the concept of island chains, especially the first and second chains, which are protective and offensive maritime borders designed to project power and obstruct the access of opposing maritime powers.

The First Island Chain aims to control the seas immediately adjacent to the mainland, while the Second Island Chain extends farther into the Pacific to secure broader strategic

(1) R. Dosson, **The Malacca Dilemma & The Belt and Road Initiative: Securing China's Energy Supply**, Journal of Geo-Economic Strategy, 2022, pp. 18–34.

(2) Hugh S. Tuckfield, **The Indo-Pacific Grand Strategy and Minilateralism: AUKUS, QUAD and Beyond**, in **Decoding the Chessboard of Asian Geopolitics**, Springer, 2022, p.360.

depth.⁽¹⁾ Also, the plan works to develop aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines, establish a network of military and logistical centers, and strategically utilize ports such as Gwadar and Hambantota to refuel and enhance operational depth.

Beijing's strategic move, which combines military modernization, diplomatic packages and geo-economic investment, has exacerbated geopolitical competition in the Indian Ocean. Further, regional powers have responded to China's growing footprint by forming strategic coalitions; these include the Quad, the AUKUS security partnership, and the recently established US-Japan-South Korea trilateral alliance.

The primary goal of these security formations is to contain Beijing's power, a development which has consequently ignited a significant naval arms race in the region.

1- The Importance of Study

1. To determine how China is responding to an important geo-economic issue with regard to the "Malacca dilemma," and to identify the way it will affect China's economic stability as well as China's dependency on other countries (especially the West) regarding energy and trade security.
2. To develop an assessment model for determining whether China's deterrence model in attempting to counteract the influence of Western powers in strategic sea-lanes has been successful.
3. To examine the qualitative and quantitative changes in China's naval power to transition from a coastal defense posture to one of high seas projection, and to analyze the role of its new capabilities in securing Chinese interests abroad and mitigating the "Malacca dilemma."
4. To assess the security implications of China's expansion into the Indian Ocean in terms of the regional distribution of power, and to evaluate the mechanisms of deterrence and containment employed by regional and international actors to forecast maritime security's future and to mitigate the risk of potential conflict.
5. This analysis examines China's land corridor approach against its use of naval power to alleviate the "Malacca dilemma." This evaluation will determine if China's land corridor approach is effective and will also identify the principal security and geopolitical obstacles that pose a threat to the long-term viability of China's land corridor approach, and

(1) IBID, p. 364.

provide critical insights for regional decision makers. Regional containment mechanisms are actively responding to Chinese expansion in the Indian Ocean, creating a dynamic new power balance driven by intense military and economic competition. This interaction is unfolding without a comprehensive, overarching security framework, making the region increasingly prone to strategic rivalry.

II- Study Objectives

1. Analyzes the geo-economic importance of the Strait of Malacca to China, identify the nature of the “Malacca Dilemma,” and explains how this dependency constitutes a critical vulnerability that threatens its economic and energy security.
2. Evaluates China’s “dual-axis” strategy, which includes developing alternative land corridors and improving maritime projection capabilities, as a solution to the Malacca Dilemma, while identifying internal security and geopolitical challenges within transit countries.
3. Analyze the strategic shift in China’s naval power and evaluate the geopolitical implications of China’s dual-axis strategy on the regional and international balance of power in the Indian Ocean.
4. Recommend mechanisms to operationalize strategies that deal with the “Malacca dilemma” by achieving a balance between geopolitical deterrence, diversifying logistical routes, and strengthening naval power while enhancing regional cooperation.

III- Study Problem

In light of China’s geo-economic and military expansion, which aims to reduce structural dependence on the Strait of Malacca via alternative land routes and build a global naval force for projection, and with the escalation of regional counter-reactions, the main problem of the study is about the extent to which China’s adoption of the “dual axis” strategy reflects a geopolitical shift aimed at managing the “Malacca dilemma,” in light of the strategic and security repercussions of this expansion on the regional and international balance of power in the Indian Ocean. The study’s problem has several questions:

1. What is the strategic and geo-economic importance of the Strait of Malacca to China, and what is the “Malacca dilemma” facing Chinese energy security?
2. How does China seek to overcome the “Malacca dilemma” through the “dual axis” strategy (land and sea corridors)?
3. What are the security implications of China’s expansion strategy for the balance of pow-

er in the Indian Ocean, and how have regional and international powers responded?

4. What are the main recommendations and proposals for updating China's strategy to address the "Malacca Dilemma" by balancing geopolitical deterrence, diversifying logistical routes, and enhancing maritime power with regional reassurance and cooperation?

IV- Study Methodology

The following scientific approaches have been adopted to address the subject of the study on China's strategy towards the "Malacca Dilemma" and its repercussions on the balance of power in the Indian Ocean, with a focus on understanding the interaction between hard and soft power tools and geopolitical transformation, in order to reach the desired results:

1. Descriptive Approach: includes collecting and extrapolating data and analyses related to the components of China's strategy towards the Indian Ocean, including the quantitative and qualitative development of naval power, details of land corridor infrastructure, and locating its logistics centers within the "Pearl Chain" such as Djibouti and Gwadar. This method is critical in determining what the "Malacca Dilemma" means as well as the geopolitical mechanisms of deterrence that China will employ to mitigate its strategic vulnerabilities.

2. Analyze: This study utilizes a strategic approach, drawing upon scientific explanations and information from specialized studies and using that data to draw conclusions which are scientifically based. In particular, this research examines the impact of Chinese expansion on regional security and the balance of power in the region with an emphasis on how China's expansion can result in regional counter-actions. It explores the relationship between Chinese strategy and geopolitical competition in the Indian Ocean, and proposes practical solutions for balancing deterrence and cooperation.

Based on the above, the study topic will be addressed in the following items, including the strategic and geo-economic importance of the Strait of Malacca for China, China's strategy to address the Malacca dilemma: corridors and coercion, China's maritime reach: Malacca, the pearl chain, the projection of power, and China's strategic positioning in the Indian Ocean: from choke points to equilibrium. On this basis, recommendations and proposals will be presented through which effective strategic policies can be drawn up aimed at managing geopolitical competition and enhancing regional and global security and stability.

I. The strategic and geo-economic importance of the Strait of Malacca for China

China is among the largest importers of oil and gas in the world, and it is very reliant on Middle Eastern and African supplies. More than 80% of its imported oil passes through the Strait of Malacca, making this sea lane a lifeline for Chinese energy.⁽¹⁾ This critical dependence puts China at risk since any interruption of traffic through the strait would cause an internal energy crisis for the national economy, especially since heavy industry and transport are so dependent on imported fuel.

Besides energy, the Strait of Malacca is also one of the most important sea lanes in the world for global international trade, with an estimated 25% of global international maritime trade passing through it.⁽²⁾ In this context, for China, the strait represents an important gateway to its imports and exports to and from Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. This strategic role highlights the strait's place in China's geo-economic calculus and makes its security and stability an overriding priority of Beijing's maritime policy.

The Strait of Malacca is a "marine choke point," a narrow passage that can potentially cut off global navigation in times of crises or wars. It is one of the major choke points threatening the security of sea lines of communication (SLOCs) for China since any terrorist attack, piracy, or regional conflict will result in paralysis of ship traffic that directly affects the country's economic and energy security.⁽³⁾

Beijing policymakers understand the importance of the strait, and various Chinese strategic thinkers have sounded alarm about the "Malacca dilemma," as the risk of reliance on the corridor has come to be called. This strategic approach is key to understanding the nature of the "Malacca Dilemma" and detailing the specific geopolitical deterrence mechanisms that Beijing has adopted to counter its vulnerability.⁽⁴⁾

As a result of these obstacles, China was keen to enhance the security of the Strait of Malacca, strengthen its maritime influence in the South China Sea, and conclude cooperation agreements with Southeast Asian countries, specifically Malaysia and Singapore. The es-

(1) Robert D. Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific*, Random House, 2014, pp. 101–105.

(2) Ong-Webb, Graham Gerard, *Piracy, Maritime Terrorism and Naval Strategy in the Asia-Pacific*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 2006, pp. 88–95.

(3) Zhengyu Wu, *China's Maritime Strategy and the Malacca Dilemma*, *Journal of Contemporary China Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 2016, pp. 45–60.

(4) *IBID*, p.62.

establishment of a naval base in Djibouti also reflects its desire to secure sea lanes. China is also working to form a flexible naval shield to secure its interests without causing tensions with neighboring countries. In the face of the worsening rivalry between China and the United States, geopolitical tension in the Strait of Malacca is multiplying due to its strategic importance. Therefore, ensuring stability in the Strait depends on China's ability to balance protecting its interests with consolidating international cooperation and coordination.

II. China's Malacca Fix: Land-Based Alternatives and Coercive Strategies

The Strait of Malacca is a key strategic maritime chokepoint in Southeast Asia which is viewed by the PRC as one of the most significant threats to its national energy security. Due to geographical constraints, the PRC relies heavily on the Strait of Malacca for its energy imports. This reliance creates a strategic vulnerability; any interruption to this narrow waterway, whether from regional conflicts or piracy, could severely impact China's economic stability. Consequently, amidst intensifying competition with the United States, Beijing has initiated efforts to develop alternative routes. These initiatives aim to reduce structural dependency on this critical maritime artery and mitigate the risks associated with potential disruptions.⁽¹⁾

Therefore, to reduce the severity of this intertwined strategic problem, China used a two-dimensional strategy. The first axis includes the formation of land corridors, the most important of which are the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Myanmar Economic Corridor, both of which are keen to secure safer roads that overcome maritime choke points that are witnessing tensions. The second axis is based on modernizing China's maritime capabilities, in order to ensure navigation security for its maritime trade and protect economic corridors from any potential future geopolitical risks.⁽²⁾ China's natural gas and petroleum pipeline that connects Yunnan Province with Kyaukpyu in Myanmar, is a significant and strategically located route; it allows Chinese importation of oil from the Arabian Gulf through the Bay of Bengal thereby, decreasing dependency upon the Strait of Malacca.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a strategic undertaking connecting Xinjiang in China to the port of Gwadar in Pakistan and provides an alternate land-based

(1) L. Wang, **China's Strategic Energy Corridors: Balancing Risk and Reach**, Beijing Policy Institute, 2024, pp. 15-22.

(2) L. Wang, **China's Strategic Energy Corridors: Balancing Risk and Reach**, o.p.cit., p. 19.

transportation corridor for oil and gas by-passing the Strait of Malacca. The corridor is critical to diversifying China's energy supply and reducing its impact on seaports where the US Navy has influence in the Indo-Pacific region. Although the operational cost is higher than the traditional sea route through the Strait of Malacca, these land corridors provide Beijing with strategic flexibility and contribute to achieving strategic energy independence. In this context, Beijing aims to achieve a balance between cost and security by using these corridors to transfer energy and redirect global geo-economic gravity towards Asia. However, the long-term effectiveness of the economic corridor has been complicated by ongoing security challenges, particularly from separatist groups in Baluchistan, and inherent geopolitical instability caused by tensions between India and Pakistan.⁽¹⁾ Overall, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor projects highlight the need for China to address internal challenges and maintain its strategic influence in the region.

III. China's Naval Reach: Malacca, String of pearls, and Power Projection

Over the past few years, China has developed into one of the most significant naval powers in the world. By 2030, the Chinese Navy's warships could be over 440 and still growing.⁽²⁾ It's an indication of a shift in strategic focus from a coastal defensive posture to one in which warships are deployed and operated in the open ocean. There's a desire on the part of the Chinese government to defend and extend their hegemony over the primary trade routes between China and the African Continent and the Middle East. With tensions rising with Taiwan and in the South China Sea, China has a need to show the world that they are in control of their military. Chinese Navy's helicopter amphibious assault ship, 075, and 071, are designed to accomplish large scale amphibious attacks, strategic logistics, and disaster relief. They provide the Chinese military with an unchallenged maritime power and the ability to conduct rapid intervention, especially in the case of a confinement hell like the ones they would face with the strait of Malacca. That would threaten China with a blockade of vital internal resources like energy and trade.⁽³⁾

China adopted the "Pearl Contract" plan to spread its influence; by establishing a system

(1) Khurram Siddiqui, **Security of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC): Counterinsurgency in Balochistan**, Routledge, London, 2023, pp. 22–35.

(2) Andrew S. Erickson, **Chinese Naval Shipbuilding: An Ambitious and Uncertain Course**, Naval Institute Press, 2017, pp. 45–52.

(3) Robert D. Kaplan, **Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific**, Random House, 2014, pp. 101–105.

of camps and support and supply points that spread from the South China Sea to the Horn of Africa (East Africa). This includes the Djibouti military base, which ensures anti-piracy operations and supply support in the Horn of Africa. The project also includes the ports of Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka, as well as sites in Kyakpo, Myanmar. The bases are being used as a source of fuel; logistics; and landing platforms, indicating that China is seeking to become a global maritime security power. The bases will support China's ability to protect the sea-lanes it relies upon to import oil from the Arabian Gulf and other African nations, while providing logistical support for disaster relief efforts throughout the region. These bases are also serving as instruments of geopolitical coercion for China, by which China can exert influence over the host countries and extend China's reach into the Indian Ocean – a critical area of competition between the world's great powers.

India's geopolitical spread has raised concerns about China's expansion into the ports of Gwadar and Hambantota, jeopardizing its regional interests due to loss of confidence and border disputes. This dynamic has compelled India to bolster its naval presence in the Indian Ocean, expand military cooperation with the United States, Japan, and Australia (the Quad), and invest heavily in strategic naval bases in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Such navigational rivalry is reshaping regional politics and heightening the potential for friction between Asian powers, particularly within a fragile collective security framework. Consequently, maritime competition between China and India is poised to intensify, as both nations prioritize their strategic interests in a region vital to global commerce. The eventual outcome of this rivalry will depend on whether or not both countries can manage their differences diplomatically and not allow their competition to escalate into military conflicts; the importance of the influence of other regional powers (Indonesia & Singapore) should not be discounted either in terms of maintaining a balance of power and stability of sea lanes. Strengthening multilateral maritime cooperation and developing effective collective security mechanisms is essential to reduce escalation and enhance regional stability.

IV. China's Strategic Pivot in the Indian Ocean: From Bottlenecks to Balance

China is implementing a two-dimensional strategy to reduce its dependence on sea lanes where American influence exists, particularly in the Strait of Malacca and the Indian Ocean. This is due to China's awareness and understanding of the risks and implications

of the “maritime strangulation” challenge, which impacts energy security and international trade in the conflict. Therefore, China is working to access approved land corridors, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Myanmar Corridor. These projects reflect logistical alternatives and expand Chinese influence regionally through investment in infrastructure projects. It also seeks to modernize its naval capabilities by developing its naval fleet, aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines. In this context, these logistical sites, called the “chain of pearls”, constitute a means of geopolitical influence.⁽¹⁾

In the face of the growing risks of Chinese expansion in the Indian Ocean, India has worked to intensify its defense cooperation through the quadripartite security dialogue with the United States, Australia and Japan. India has doubled its military presence in the sea lanes and developed its navy to challenge China’s growing influence. These measures are part of India’s strategy versus China’s “Pearl Contract”, known as the “Diamond Contract”, through which China is keen to form strategic maritime partnerships and locations around China to protect its regional security. Japan has extended its naval activities to cover the Indian Ocean through collective combat maneuvers and logistical support, demonstrating a shift in its defense doctrine toward protecting navigation in the region and regional security.

Further, Australia recognizes that China poses a threat to the balance of power in the South Pacific and has therefore strengthened its navigational capabilities through the AUKUS agreement with the United States and the United Kingdom.⁽²⁾ In this regard, the path also represents an understanding that the ongoing geopolitical competition is no longer limited to the region of Asia, but to the world’s oceans as well. Consequently, the shift in maritime security dynamics has redefined the control of sea lanes as a pivotal element of strategic deterrence. Thus, every port and strait has become a potential flashpoint in the broader global power struggle. The question still remains if regional and international actors are able to contain their competition, without escalating into overt conflict or war, particularly without a comprehensive security framework for the Indian Ocean.

(1) Mohan Malik, **China’s Strategic Aspirations: Naval Expansion, Maritime Silk Road, and the Indian Ocean**, National Defense University Press, Washington D.C., 2022, pp. 58–74.

(2) Leszek Buszynski, **Geopolitics and Strategy: China, the Quad and the Southeast Asian Pivot**, Palgrave Macmillan, 2025, pp. 83–101.

CONCLUSION

Amid escalating geopolitical challenges in the Indian Ocean, China faces the so-called “Malacca Dilemma,” which poses a threat to its energy and trade security through the sea lanes over which its adversaries extend. This dilemma calls for formulating a balanced strategy that combines deterrence by diversifying logistical routes and enhancing maritime capabilities with cooperation and reassurance by building regional partnerships that reduce tension. Therefore, recommendations aimed at achieving this balance and promoting global stability must be predicated on a nuanced understanding of the complex maritime security landscape, utilizing an integrated approach that combines both soft and hard power. This requires a comprehensive understanding of the equation of influence and common interests in the region. The proposed recommendations are as follows:

a. At the level of diversifying energy pathways and reducing risks by achieving geopolitical deterrence:

1. Massive investments should be allocated to complete and protect both Myanmar and Pakistani pipeline projects, with a doubling of all western city storage facilities.
2. A joint security protection agreement will need to be established by the U.S., Myanmar and Pakistan to protect the integrity of these pipelines from ongoing civil unrest inside these two countries.
3. The U.S. needs to increase funding of renewable energy projects locally to decrease the total amount of fuel that needs to be imported to meet domestic demand.
4. Imports of liquefied natural gas (LNG) through non-traditional sea lanes should be promoted as well as building out port infrastructure in the Southeastern United States. Expanding the national strategic reserve of oil and gas inland, especially near coastal industrial centers, to ensure continuity of supply for at least 90 days in the event of a sudden maritime embargo.

b. At the level of strengthening the maritime presence to protect interests:

1. Accelerate the construction and equipping of more drop ships to enable a continuous and flexible presence in the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden.
2. Focus on developing intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities in vital sea lanes.
3. Converting “focal points” into highly efficient maintenance and refueling centers espe-

cially in Gwadar and Djibouti.

4. Seek to sign access and port agreements with additional friendly countries in the Western Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia to ensure “logistical depth”.

c. At the level of regional cooperation and maritime diplomacy

1. Strengthening China’s role in combating piracy in the Strait of Malacca and the Gulf of Aden, in cooperation with ASEAN countries.

2. Launching joint humanitarian naval exercises with countries in the region to enhance transparency, build confidence, and reduce “encirclement concerns” raised by India.

3. Take a softer and more transparent diplomatic stance in South China Sea disputes to ease regional tensions.

4. Use economic investment as a tool to promote regional stability rather than relying on direct military deterrence.

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